The Direction Opposite My Heart:

A Place Essay

**By Regina Grant**

**Numb**

Africa. And I thought Lion King. Everything was so lovely in the Prideland; light reflected off the waterhole causing a kaleidoscopic clarity; incomparable to any other purity I’d ever known. Emerald grass cushioned every step I took, as I ran alongside zebras watching their black chase white symmetrically by my eyes as fruit-colored candy birds flew above my head.

When I was ten I watched Mufasa die over and over and over again. Feeling the loss strongly at first but somehow becoming numb as most people do to things with which they are not personally connected. My siblings bored quickly with my habitual adventure, but as the youngest I always picked—and I chose monkeys and giraffes and I was Nala, so in love with Simba.

When I stepped off the plane in Mozambique I did not find “The Lion King.” The sun was setting on the twisted trees of Quelimane and there wasn’t an elephant in sight. A slight breeze added a sensation to my already tingling, half-asleep feet as it danced the African grass across my shins. The sky felt lower somehow. I could extend my arm, stand on my tip-toes, stretch out my fingers and sweep them across the bottom of a cotton cloud passing by—pausing up ahead as if to ask “Who touched me?”

The winter air of Mozambique is hot and dry. It doesn’t crawl across your skin leaving a moist residue or force its way down your throat and into your lungs, making you feel and look as if you’re swimming on dry land. This is the effect of Arkansas air in the summer. It’s a funny feeling to get on a plane in the summer and to land somewhere else in the winter. Mozambican air is smooth. It surrounds, but does not suppress, nor does it impose itself on anyone or anything. It just is—exactly as air should be.

I filled my lungs with the new atmosphere, trying to somehow cleanse my insides of all the thoughts that pulled me back onto the plane—back home, and I recalled why I was there. People were dying. It is the nature of water to move, but the water of Quelimane was stagnant, and I could help. So I committed myself completely to a month long mission in Africa. It was fate. The continent I dreamed of, played at in my youth was shouting my name so loud I couldn’t muffle the sound. The night I signed up for this trip my heart ached for the water-less children. A giant fist plunged into my chest and took hold of my most vital organ, squeezing it angrily between its massive fingers until warm liquid flowed from it down my cheeks. I couldn’t sit still. I squirmed under the pressure. So I rolled these recollections around in my head, until thoughts of home had no room, and were shoved to a much darker place.

And when my selfish thoughts were breathless and dying, I realized the more present problem: I was detached. I stood apart, one single person among so many. Solitary. I did not know this place. I thought the moment I arrived I would feel something. Anything. But truth be told, I was numb… completely disconnected from the death of Mufasa, the deaths of millions of people infected with AIDS, the deaths of so many malnourished babies. The deaths. The deaths. The deaths.

I found changed the ancient green on which I danced as a child. There were no lions, no exotic birds greeted me with cute sing-songs about the brightness of my future… and why was I so disappointed? I was twenty, and certainly old enough to have realistic expectations and views of the world. The training I’d received, even now plays like a slideshow of poverty-stricken people. I should have been ready. Maybe it was that even as real as my ideas of Africa had been before I arrived (as real as any ideas of a middle-class American young woman with all the benefits of race and education and substantial money could get), I had somehow gotten way off base.

The noises of Quelimane itched the inside of my ears. A baby wails unseen swaddled in a sling on the back of one of the barefoot women strategically balancing things as large as a mattress between braids and bandanas. So many swollen bellies, infected feet, open wounds. These were the first to welcome me into my childhood dreamland. What did they have to do with me?

Everything.

**Water Bottles**

“It is important to stay hydrated.” I heard these words over and over and over again. They became like *bom dia* or “good morning”. Each day before I climbed into the tiny, over-crowded, white van headed for the school I grabbed a plastic water bottle. I’d hold it between my knees as I held in my breakfast, bouncing over the gaping holes in the “streets” of Quelimane, Mozambique. Already I’d envision an army of small children fighting over it by the end of the day… or even before noon, depending on the sun and the heat and whether we were digging holes or painting goat pens. How many had I thrown away in my lifetime?

The children used the bottles for nearly everything. They kicked them in play, they used them as drumsticks (sometimes on each other), but mostly they stored whatever food or liquid they could find in them. It was not uncommon to see a tiny African child holding a water bottle to his or her mouth, sucking out pieces of mushed-up beans and rice. Beans and rice I immediately recognize as yesterday’s lunch and quickly my stomach turns.

*I remember…*

*A small boy takes my hand. He makes me think of Dalton, my two-year-old cousin. Their bellies both pooch out the same way—only Dalton’s arms and legs are fat, and the skin on his fingers look like over-sized baby carrots, barely able to contain the combination of bone and muscle and fat inside. This child’s fingers feel frail between mine. His arms hang lank by his sides, and I wonder how legs that skinny can carry him to and from the tiny “Peace School” which must be miles from his home. He points to the bottle in my other hand… then to himself.*

Sometimes when a child would request my empty bottle they would, by the means of a long game of charades, indicate that they would be taking it home to their parents. African adults used these water bottles the way American adults use Tupperware, and storage bins, and, unfortunately… gas cans.

My second day in Quelimane a three year old boy died. He drank a water bottle of gasoline.

**Paint**

I met Terazinha my first day at the Peace School.

The tiny school essentially consisted of three small concrete buildings with swept dirt floors, a goat pen, a restroom (a concrete enclosure with two bricks strategically placed shoulder-width apart in the middle of the small space), and a vast field of tall, wispy grass in the back (a field which by the end of the day would be a wreckage of freshly tilled earth.) My team would be spending the whole first day clearing it. We used what you would think of as the ancient version of a hoe, the object that is sketched into the hands of the nomads that lay between the pages of nearly every early American elementary school history book.

That first day the sun was high. Immediately my skin baked and browned, even in the slight slant of early morning light, and I felt my nose freckle underneath the thick layer of pungent lotion as soon as I stepped onto the grassy plot. I welcomed the warmth, letting the sun surround and saturate me. A light tap from a dark hand interrupted my musings. I turned and found a small girl. Her hair was cut short and rolled into tiny balls around her scalp, her brow was high and seemed much too sophisticated to exist on such a young head, and her smile was as close to perfection as I’d ever seen. Keeping one for herself, she handed me an ancient instrument with a timid grin and expectant eyes, and I dropped down to my knees so that I could look into them more closely. They were deep and dark, like mine. For a moment I felt as though I was looking into a mirror, and I’d like to say that she felt the same, although I can’t be sure.

We did our best to communicate, but I only knew basic bits of Portuguese, and I discovered in a short time that she only knew a small amount of it as well. Her native tongue was Chuwabo, the language of the bush people in Quelimane. We sat staring at each other for a few minutes, got acquainted with confusion, and then she placed her hand in mine and led me to the packed dirt floor on which the school was laid. With a stick she began to write her name. Terazinha. She pointed to the inscription, then to herself, and handed me the utensil. I sounded out her name. She laughed at my awkward noise. I took the stick and carved my name beneath hers. I glanced up to see her response. Her face broke into a smile. She took my hand again and briskly led me to a miniature girl in a dirt-dusted yellow dress. She pointed to the girl and then to me, repeating “Rashina!” When she was certain that I understood her point she led me away from the girl with an air of ownership and worked beside me in the field until the sun sank slowly behind row upon row upon row of coconut trees.

From that day on Terazinha found me the moment I arrived at the school. If I were lost in a crowd of my teammates she would chant my name, and I hers, until we found each other. On my third day in Quelimane she introduced me, by the means of our dirty tablet, to a younger boy with our eyes, her *irmão* (brother), Piquoininu. He had a sweet and solemn face that lacked his sister’s joy. But he peered at me with the same penetrating beauty. Even now I wonder how a person could be simultaneously so childlike and so wise.

Each break from work, and after they were finished with class for the day, my tiny friends and I would exchange bits of vocabulary. We traded “sky” and “tree” and “pretty”... all of which I have now misplaced somewhere in a somewhat small and cluttered attic of accumulated knowledge. I learned during this time that my pretty friend was ten and that her brother just turned seven, and she learned “head and shoulders, knees and toes” and all the very animated motions that walk hand-in-hand with the song. When we were bored or frustrated with our lesson they would teach me patty-cakes or run their tiny fingers through my tangled hair or I would chase them around tickling them until we were all rolling in the dirt laughing in a beautiful unison.

My last day at the Peace School we painted the playground that we built for the children during our time with the school. I used bright blue for the see-saw, a see-saw that perplexed the students until one of my teammates and I taught them how it should be used... and then it was hard to convince the children to stay off it long enough for the paint to dry. During the coloring process I somehow managed to get a bright blue tattoo in the middle of my forehead. I didn’t realize it was there until some of the children began to tease me about the colored freckle. Upon noticing this, Terazinha marched up to me, pulled me by the arm down to her height, tapped my blemish with her index finger, then touched the center of her own forehead. We stared at each other for a moment, much like we had the first time we met, but this time confusion wasn’t present. In its place was understanding, belonging, a deep kinship. I wrapped her in my arms and we cried until I boarded the bus where my body headed in the direction opposite my heart and long after Terazinya’s tiny feet tired of trying to run in time with the wheels.